

How may having ebooks available from the library promote literacy?

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One of the most significant responsibilities of the library and library collection is to promote literacy. Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan (2006) maintain that “literacy, in any form, advances a person’s ability to effectively and creatively use and communicate information.” They discuss a very broad concept of literacy which has evolved to embrace multiliteracies, or transliteracies, and when discussing how ebooks may promote literacy this will be a significant aspect.

Under the umbrella of literacy falls the sharing of great literature and the promotion of reading for pleasure – depending on the tastes and needs of the individual reader. The Scholastic Kids and families reading report (2010) identifies three areas which are important to children in their reading – using their imagination, finding information and being inspired through storyline and character. In searching for ways of doing this better, I intend to try to find out whether having ebooks available from the library may promote literacy.

Cavanaugh (2003) defines ebooks as books or other text documents that have been converted to digital format and can be used in the classroom as reading sources. This conversion began in the 1970s, but Cavanaugh considers that the true ebook emerged when the first public domain books became available in text or html format early in the

21st century. An ebook requires hardware (computer, mobile device, dedicated ereader), ebook software and the ebook file. The first ebooks were files consisting of one web page, with the reader scrolling continuously down the page. This has changed dramatically. Beadenkopf (2009) discusses the different formats available, and their current attributes. Doug Johnson (2007) gives a detailed picture of what he perceives the ebook will be in 2015. Much of what he predicts is happening already. Ebooks from Follett Titlewave (2011) have many interactive features – highlighting, note making, book marking, dictionary, the option to change font size, display options. Using the Follett Destiny Library Management System[®] provides the opportunity to add digital content to a book's record and to network with fellow readers. This applies to print and ebooks, but points the way forward in the library world.

From a librarian's perspective these advances in ebook delivery are very exciting – both from an instructional and from a recreational view point. Ebooks lend themselves to sharing and learning with a group of students through an interactive white board where text can be highlighted, notes can be saved, images discussed, writing styles considered and compared. All of these attributes should promote literacy, as librarians and teachers take advantage of them. From the student's perspective ebooks mean that the library can offer a 24/7 lending service with ebooks available for download from anywhere at any time – another dynamic to promote literacy. In his current study of K-12 educators usage of and attitudes to ebooks, John Fredricks (2011) claims that 75% of ebook purchasers believe that ebooks will have a positive impact on reading comprehension.

The 2010 Horizon Report names ebooks as a technology to watch, with widespread adoption being mooted in two to three years' time. The 2011 Horizon Report brings the time frame forward to one year or less. It also reiterates the evolving nature of ebooks – away from a mere digital reproduction of a printed page to an interactive experience involving social networking and collaboration, all of which will promote literacy. The 2011 Horizon Report also points to the facility of ebooks being constantly updated without having to replace the entire book. If we venture out of the classroom into people's homes, we will find across the generations, a far greater variety of digital platforms and applications than many schools currently provide. For education to remain relevant this gap will need to continue to close, and one way that this can be achieved in the library is to consider all available technology and formats, including ebooks with the multiliteracies that they encourage.

Therese Kenny (2010) of Loreto Normanhurst library has recounted her library's successful introduction of ebooks through Overdrive[®]. Students have the option of downloading ebooks onto their personal devices – ipads, ipods, iphones, digital readers, laptops, or onto school computers. Using a company like Overdrive[®] resolves the issue surrounding Digital Rights Management (DRM) which is one of the thorny questions that schools have to navigate before introducing ebooks. The 2011 Horizon Report quotes DRM and price as being the two obstacles to wide spread introduction of ebooks in schools. This is echoed by the School Library Journal virtual summit, E-books School

Libraries at the Tipping Point (2011) where the two main obstacles are stated as DRM issues, and the lack of a single platform that can be used for all ebook formats. These researchers found that in the libraries they surveyed 72% have their students download ebooks onto library computers. Few schools are buying digital readers for loan to students – the accompanying problems of loss, damage, downloading rights are yet to be resolved.

In my research, I will be considering ebooks from the library being downloaded onto laptops and read either at home or at school; Qatar Academy is not yet considering purchasing digital readers. In an elementary school setting, i-pads are more likely to be widely used for downloading ebooks than kindles, nooks or sony readers, as they have the advantage of color and powerful graphics, so picture books and early chapter books with illustrations can be effectively read on an i-pad. Ocean House Media has the rights to Dr. Seuss's books available through an app on the i-pad. The president, Michel Kripalani (qtd. in Springen 2010) wrote that " 'Ted Geisel was all about teaching kids how to read. Every feature we put into this book has to support reading and teaching kids how to read.' To wit, Oceanhouse's apps let kids touch an object, such as a hat, and see the word for it float forward. And as the narrator reads, the app highlights the corresponding text."

Kindles, nooks and sony readers, currently only available in black and white, are more appropriate for middle and high school reading tastes, where the advantages are

portability, light weight, number of books that can be downloaded at one time, as well as the interactive features previously mentioned.

Picture books and elementary readers can also expand to multimedia with video and sound, thus taking into account multiliteracies and transliteracies. Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan (2006) note that for children today, 21st century literacies which involve digital and visual literacies and are about creating, communicating and designing, are like a language which they learn effortlessly like a mother tongue, and more and more, schools need to teach the skills of problem solving, higher order thinking, while using the broader literacies as the vehicle – a vehicle with which our students are quite at home. “The greatest challenge now is moving beyond the glitz and pizzazz of the flashy technology and teaching true literacy in this new milieu. Using many of the same skills we have used for centuries—analysis, synthesis, and evaluation—we now must look at digital literacy as another realm within which to apply elements of critical thinking.” (Jones-Kavalier and Flannigan, 2006)

This leads to a consideration of best practice at Qatar Academy. Best practice is a learning environment where students are engaged and challenged and which promotes critical thinking. The Qatar Academy mission statement includes the concept that the school develops independent critical thinkers and lifelong learners. Facilitating the use of ebooks and thereby promoting multiliteracies fits this requirement.

Several studies have been done on the motivating features of ebooks for students. Kerrie Smith (2010) claims that both reluctant and avid readers report an increase in reading thanks to ebooks, as well as an appreciation of their interactive features. Pat Pledger (2010) writes of ebooks contributing to fluency and vocabulary development, and also to the privacy offered to struggling readers in terms of their choice of reading. The Scholastic Kids and families reading report (2010) suggests that ebooks are a strong motivator for reading.

Doug Johnson (2007) – taking his cue from Marc Prensky comments, “If we don’t engage them, they’ll find something that does.....” As we strive to meet our students at their current levels of engagement and interest we need to open the door to technology which allows for collaboration, creativity and inspiration. It is interesting to note that in July 2010, sales of ebooks for kindles outstripped the sale of hard cover books through Amazon.com, as reported in the Horizon Report, 2010.

There are however dissenting voices. In response to a video *The future of the book*, referred to in the 2011 Horizon report, Adrienne Adams commented that ebooks are trying to make reading books like reading the internet – she equates the internet to endless distraction, books to focus and contemplation, with the opportunity for discussion among like-minded readers. Reading a paper book, using pen and paper for note making, referring to other books if necessary, enjoying the hedonistic pleasure of holding a book and turning the pages, are features that many will be reluctant to abandon.

In the final analysis what is important is the content of the book, not necessarily its format, but in the same way that librarians have had to accept that students will almost always reject a book if the cover is not appealing, so now we need to look at what ebooks can do for promoting literacy and a love of reading, and giving teachers and librarians an opportunity to give students the skills they need in different forms of literacy.

I intend to observe a group of students as they read ebooks on different platforms, and survey their engagement with them. I also intend to ask the classroom teachers to comment on any change in motivation or interest in reading and also any indication that access to ebooks has promoted literacy in its wider context – comprehension, visual literacy, digital literacy, analysis, synthesis and critical thinking.

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